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**FATWORLD: Online Game Explores America's Obesity Crisis**

***Web Users Invited to Take the Challenge: Fit or Fat? Live or Die? You Decide***

**Begins January 14, 2008, at [www.fatworld.org](http://www.fatworld.org)**

(San Francisco, CA)—ITVS Interactive (Independent Television Service) and PBS's Emmy® Award-winning weekly series *Independent Lens* today published FATWORLD, an online video game created by Atlanta-based independent game studio Persuasive Games, about the politics of nutrition. FATWORLD explores the relationships between obesity, nutrition and socioeconomics in the United States.

In the last two decades, obesity has soared in the United States. According to the Centers for Disease Control and the National Center for Health Statistics, 30 percent of American adults are obese. And this increase isn't limited to adults. Since 1980, more than three times as many children aged 18 and under are obese—or around 15 percent of all American minors. Of the nearly 300 million people alive in America today, nearly 70 million are overweight.

FATWORLD constructs a small-scale society in which players decide what to eat, how much to exercise, what foods should be sold and what regulations should be imposed to determine their own health and that of their community. The game's goal is not to tell people what to eat or how to exercise, but to demonstrate the complex, interwoven relationships between nutrition, obesity and social factors like budgets, the physical environment, food subsidies and government policy. FATWORLD is a game for adults and teens, but it can also serve as a starting point for discussions with children about nutrition, health and socioeconomics.

"Existing approaches to nutrition advocacy fail to communicate the collective effect of everyday health practices," said FATWORLD lead designer and Persuasive Games co-founder Dr. Ian Bogost. "Video games are a remarkable medium for overcoming these failings. In a video game, we can simulate the passage of time and give players a view of their future selves based on their current habits. In a video game, we can simulate the interactions between multiple factors and complicate common views on nutrition and obesity. And most of all, in a video game we can change the rules." Bogost, who is also a professor of digital media at the Georgia Institute of Technology, has written extensively on video games as tools for social intervention, most recently in his book *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Video games*.

In FATWORLD, players create a world, design a character and live out an accelerated life in that world. Players choose starting weights and health conditions, including predispositions toward ailments like diabetes, heart disease or food allergies. When entering the game, each player will have to construct menus and recipes, decide what their character will eat and which foods to avoid, choose the type of exercise to do (or not), and run a restaurant business to serve the rest of the community. By choosing a character's dietary and exercise habits, players can experiment with the constraints of nutrition and economics as they affect their character's general health. Will it be wheatgrass and soy or fried chicken at every meal? How much can your character afford to spend on food, and how does that affect his or her general health? Characters who eat more than they burn will get fat. Characters who eat poorly will develop adverse health conditions. Characters who don't exercise will move around the world more laboriously. Disease and death will eventually ravage players with poor health, whereas those with good health will live to a ripe old age.

*-More-*



In FATWORLD, players also have an opportunity to influence public policy by visiting the Govern-O-Mat and to get a glimpse into their own character's health—if they can afford it—at the Health-O-Mat. Players can alter guidelines on merchandising for FATWORLD, changing market dynamics to encourage certain products and discourage others. For example, the player could ban partially hydrogenated oils in FATWORLD, effectively removing them from the store shelves. Or they could ban meat or fruit, for that matter.

“The main social change we’re interested in stimulating through the game is the idea that personal responsibility should not be the primary answer,” said Bogost. “We need higher-order interventions, including certain regulations, to really change our collective well-being.”

FATWORLD includes a Recipe Exchange, where players can export recipes and meal plans they create in the game and upload them to the website, and they can download content other players have created. The website also features links and resources for learning more about food politics, obesity, health and nutrition, diet and exercise. FATWORLD is the sixth project to emerge from ITVS's Electric Shadows initiative, a special fund for innovative Web-original projects.

### **About Persuasive Games**

Persuasive Games designs and distributes video games with a message, games that push at the boundaries of the medium. Titles invite players to experience social issues, politics, news, brands, and other topics in fun and engaging environments. Games are often thought as only a leisure activity, but Persuasive Games designs to both entertain and teach. Recent clients include: Cold Stone Creamery, Domino's Pizza, Cisco Systems, Red Octane, Shockwave, CNN.com, UK Clinical Virology Network, Chrysler, and NYTimes.com, with works featured on CNN, MSNBC, MTV and G4TechTV, in the *New York Times*, and via many other media outlets. Think games are just for fun? Think again. For more information about Persuasive Games, visit [www.persuasivegames.com](http://www.persuasivegames.com).

### **Electric Shadows and *Independent Lens* Web Exclusives**

The *Independent Lens* website at **PBS.org** is proud to be a portal to Electric Shadows projects, which feature the unflinching visions of independent media makers via the Web. The Electric Shadows initiative is a special fund for innovative Web-original projects that offer untold, provocative stories and social-issue games by today's independent storytellers. Presented by *Independent Lens* and ITVS Interactive and funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, Electric Shadows sites explore the arts, culture and society through innovative forms and meet the ITVS mission of taking creative risks and advancing civic participation. Electric Shadows projects include OFF THE MAP, the Webby Award-winning site that takes users on a multimedia tour of works by backyard visionary artists, and BEYOND THE FIRE, an interactive project designed for teens that explores the human cost of war through the stories of 15 teenage war refugees. Since its inception in 2002, the Electric Shadows initiative has funded six online projects that have garnered a People's Choice Webby Award and two SXSW Web Awards. Electric Shadows projects have also been Yahoo! Picks and have been included in Time.com's "50 Coolest Websites." In 2007, ITVS Interactive developed a special Electric Shadows call for proposals targeting independent game developers. FATWORLD was one of two game projects selected. The first, WORLD WITHOUT OIL, was an alternate reality game simulating a global oil shock that played out in spring 2007. Explore all six projects and learn more about Electric Shadows at <http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/interactive.html>.

For more information about ITVS, visit [www.itvs.org](http://www.itvs.org).

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